

*Onondaga Citizens League**2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on May 8, 2012**Meeting held at PEC, 605 James Street, Syracuse*

Attendees: Attendees: Paul Ariik, Mark Cass, Felicia Castricone, Karen Kitney, Don MacLaughlin, Pat MacLaughlin, David Reed, Paul Predmore, Eric Rogers, Peter Sarver, Lois Schroeder, John Scott, Dzenan Selimovic, Nancy Shepard, Amy Thorna, Lisa Warnecke, Angosom Mezgebo, Idiris Mahomed and Abdulahi Ibrahim.

Presenters: Marlena Daher-Rahman, Stephanie Horton, Theresa Pagano, Robin Morgan.

Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz, Kristen Heath

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

Summary

Members of the Literacy and Education subcommittee who provide services to refugees presented an overview of the literacy education programming available to adult refugees. Because the web of services is so extensive, the subcommittee said it would reserve discussion of the K-12 programming available for a future OCL meeting in July. A map of the network of services offered to refugees will be posted on the OCL website under the “resources” section. A handful of refugees were present at the meeting to discuss their motivations, challenges and successes at learning English, including their use of the presented services. The meeting ended with an open Q&A and discussion session.

The Economic Opportunities and Jobs subcommittee will present its discussion at the next OCL meeting on Wednesday, May 23, at 12 Noon at the United Way, 518 James St., Syracuse.

The schedule for future subcommittee presentations is:

June 12—Health

June 27—Housing

July 10 - Crime & Safety

Online Resources

An email was sent to OCL study committee members to sign up for the OCL 2012 study committee listserv, which will allow for an exchange of ideas and resources between meetings. Members could consider sharing “magic wand” ideas--the dreams for how Syracuse could become even more welcoming and helpful to its refugees and their communities.

Literacy and Education

The discussion was led by: Stephanie Horton from the Syracuse City School District Refugee Assistance Program (Bob’s School), Theresa Pagano from the West Side Learning Center, Marlena Daher-Rahman from the Syracuse Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) and Robin Morgan from Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse. Amy Thorna from the Onondaga County Public Library moderated the

discussion.

Stephanie presented a map of the network of English literacy and education providers available to refugees and said that once a refugee goes through Bob's School, there is no "one" route he or she could take to further learn English. All newly arrived refugees start at Bob's School, are tested on their level of English proficiency with Best Plus (a listening and speaking) exam, sign an agreement to learn English and to try to get employment as soon as possible, and then are placed in English classes within 1.5 months. While they await their classes, refugees are getting settled in Syracuse and having the appropriate health checks, etc.

The school offers classes in levels 1 through 6. At level 6, a non-native English speaker is able to have a "decent conversation" in English. Currently the school runs 20 English classes at all times of day to make it convenient to students. A few years ago, the school ran only 8 classes. If the classes are full, students are referred to other service providers. There is no waiting list for classes at Bob's School at this time; however, all of the other agencies represented on the panel said they do have full waiting lists.

The majority of refugees are eager to learn English, and Stephanie said Bob's School doesn't have difficulties with getting students to attend classes. (Of course, there may be a refugee who falls through the cracks.) Bob's School is in constant communication with the department of Social Services, which tracks refugees' attendance in classes after four months.

After Bob's School, the path a refugee can take to continue his or her English education is as varied as a shopper's path at a grocery store. He or she can pick up a program here or there, or even double-up on programming. Or, if the refugee is remarkably proficient with English, it's not unheard of for him or her to go straight to SU or OCC.

Much of a learner's success with English depends on many factors, including the level of schooling he or she had previously, and the amount of trauma the refugee is trying to overcome.

Theresa Pagano from the West Side Learning Center, which could be a stop after Bob's School, said the center offers a "synergy of services" that range from preparing children for kindergarten at Seymour Elementary School to adult literacy education programs. Usually life has settled a bit for refugees, as it has been two to three months that they've been in the United States once they get to the center.

First, learners are given the same listening and speaking English exam that they would have taken at Bob's School. (All service providers on the panel said they conduct some sort of screening exam.) The classes focus on helping students to "have a voice in your community" and to be prepared for academic success. Each student receives a learning plan. Classes teach English grammar and mechanics, as

well as offer practical learning experiences in the community. For example, a class might plan to visit a grocery store. The teacher would explain the purpose of the visit, give an overview of the public transportation (if used), and then the class would set out on the excursion together. Afterwards, they would spend time reflecting on the experience. Theresa said this helps build confidence in the learner, and without a high level of comfort, the language “isn’t going to come.”

There is no specific answer to: How long does it take to learn English? Theresa said this can depend on the individual’s life experiences, culture (how language was used), level of formal education, emotional state, and the welcoming nature of the new community.

Paul Arik, a refugee from Sudan, interjected that it takes a “lifetime” to learn English.

Theresa provided laminated copies of learners’ writing that discussed learning English and their progress in adjusting to their new home. She said that all of the students want to learn English, to earn enough money to support their families and to live well.

Marlena Daher-Rahman from the Syracuse Educational Opportunity Center (EOC), which could be another stop for refugees after Bob’s School, spoke next. The EOC serves economically underprivileged individuals aged 17 and older who have been a resident of the state for 12 months. Exceptions to the residency rule are: refugees, aslyees and parolees.

Some individuals don’t have the documentation they need to get enrolled in EOC’s services (refugees have very little documentation with them), and if this is the case, the EOC will try to help them become eligible.

Because the EOC is state-funded, learners are given an exam that is mandated by the state (this usually tests students for a proficiency of level 4). There are two scenarios: the student isn’t ready for a class and so is placed with a literacy volunteer (who is in the EOC building), or the student passes the test and is placed into a beginning or advanced ESL class. They might be in these classes for three years; learners study at their own pace. Classes focus on mechanics, grammar, syntax, idioms, etc. The classes try to prepare them for academic success, going to college or earning a GED.

She outlined several issues that pose difficulties to refugees. They:

- lack the necessary documentation to go on to college;
- require support and advocacy as they try to help their children navigate the school systems;
- need assistance with legal issues (parking tickets, unemployment benefits, etc.); and
- may not have any learning disabilities identified up-front.

The final presenter on the panel was Robin Morgan from Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse. Volunteer tutors work one-on-one with adults aged 16 years and older to help them read, write and speak English. There are also a few small group and larger classes with credentialed teachers. The education is “learner-centered”, with the tutor and classes focusing on what the students priorities are (get jobs, etc.). Refugees usually take advantage of more than one type of program. The services may seem duplicative; but, she said, “the more help people get, and the more the variety, the better they can learn.”

In response to any criticism that Literacy Volunteers could hire more volunteers to eliminate the wait-lists, Robin said that that wouldn’t be enough. Volunteers need training and support services, and Literacy Volunteers only has so many resources to do this.

Their programs are federally, state, locally and philanthropically funded. The funding source can determine what English measuring test is used.

She referred committee members to the Literacy Coalition in Syracuse, located online at: www.cnylearns.com.

Refugee Voices

Several refugees were present at the meeting and discussed their experiences with learning English.

Idiris Mahomed from Eretria, who has been in the United States for 5 months, said learning English is a challenge, but he is very anxious “to get enough English to get work.” He can read and write it better than he can speak it. He is a student at Bob’s School and the Northside Learning Center.

Angosom Mezgebo from Ethiopia has been in the United States for 3 months. He attends the same programs at Idiris and is also eager to learn English. His background is in the technology field, and he has a long-term technology career in mind, even if it begins with manual labor or factory work until his English skills improve.

Abdulahi Ibrahim from Somalia has been in the United States for three years and has served as an advocate or mentor to newly arrived refugees. He said the range of educational services worked well for him when he first came to the U.S.

Q&A and Group Discussion

A question was asked whether it was difficult for refugees to navigate the Web of various services providers, and the refugees said no. They did say, however, that they could always use more help, particularly with the homework.

Detective Dzenan Selimovic who has been in the United States for 14 years since leaving Bosnia, said the English “teachers don’t want to keep you at the school”; the

service providers push their students toward success. He said there is plenty of assistance for newly arrived refugees to help them learn English, but that it takes time. What helped him most, though, was becoming involved in the community, using English on a daily basis with native English-speakers.

Amy Thorna said the libraries have conversational programs (as does West Side Learning Center and other community agencies) for native English speakers to meet with English learners.

A “magic wand” idea was mentioned—to have “cultural brokers” or “community navigators”. These would be individuals who would help facilitate refugees’ interactions with the Syracuse community and help make them feel more comfortable in their new neighborhoods.

A question was asked if anyone falls through the cracks within the literacy education system, and Stephanie said there is a safety net, but a refugee’s language acquisition can come to a halt for one reason or another (life, school, work, etc.), but for the most part people are getting the services they need.

Mark Cass from Proliteracy said that refugees’ progress with learning English is a “capacity issue” in the “broadest sense”. Refugees are trying to fit learning English in with everything else in their busy lives.

Stephanie said Bob’s School is trying to work with ethnic communities to offer dual language classes--in refugees’ native tongue as well as in English. This has worked well with a class in which there is a teacher who speaks Swahili as well as an English teacher. They would like to get programs rooted in the ethnic communities.

Theresa said she would like to see more job-shadowing opportunities, in which refugees can learn English in a work setting. (vocational programs)

Another question was asked about whether learning English is the goal of the programs or whether it’s assimilation, and Theresa responded that “contextualized learning” is the best way for refugees to improve their language acquisition and English functioning skills.

Mark said that refugees have a desire to assimilate but to not lose their native culture.

Stephanie closed the discussion with an anecdote about being at the school and responding to a knock at the door after hours. The school is across from a bar, and she thought it was someone who had mistakenly approached the building. Instead, the man asked if she had a Nepali dictionary, because he’s been trying to converse with a person from Nepal, and is having trouble understanding him, and he wanted to be able to translate words into English. He promised to return the dictionary and did so the next day. Stephanie said this shows how receptive the Syracuse

community can be and how it wants to communicate with refugees.